DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 784 HE 031 033

TITLE	"Best Practices" in the Student Support Services Program. A Study of Five Exemplary Sites.
INSTITUTION	Westat, Inc., Rockville, MD.; SMB Economic Research, Inc., Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC. Office of Planning, Budget, and Evaluation.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	11p.; For a related document, see ED 411 739.
CONTRACT	EA9506001
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Advising; College Freshmen; College Students; Delivery Systems; Demonstration Programs; *Disabilities; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Educational Practices; Group Instruction; Higher Education; *Instructional Effectiveness; Integrated Services; Program Effectiveness; Special Needs Students; *Student Personnel Services
IDENTIFIERS	*Student Support Services

ABSTRACT

This brochure summarizes results of a study of "best practices" in the Student Support Services program (SSS), a federal program intended to increase the college retention and graduation rates of participants who are the first-generation in their families to attend college, are disadvantaged, or are disabled. To identify best practices, SSS projects with statistically significant positive outcomes were identified from the National Study of Student Support Services. This study followed SSS freshman participants and comparable nonparticipants at 50 institutions--30 with SSS projects and 20 without for 3 years. This brochure specifically reports on five of these projects visited in 1996. Common features of successful projects are identified as including: (1) a project-designed freshman year experience for most or all participants; (2) an emphasis on providing academic support for developmental and popular freshman courses; (3) extensive student service contacts; (4) targeted participant recruitment and participation incentives; (5) dedicated staff and directors with strong institutional attachments; and (6) an important role for the project on campus. Characteristics of service delivery in these programs are also noted; they include an emphasis on group learning (though courses, supplemental instruction, and study groups/group tutoring); active counseling; and integrated services. (DB)

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"BEST PRACTICES" IN THE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES PROGRAM

A STUDY OF FIVE EXEMPLARY SITES

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"Best Practices" in Student Support Services:

A Study of Five Exemplary Sites

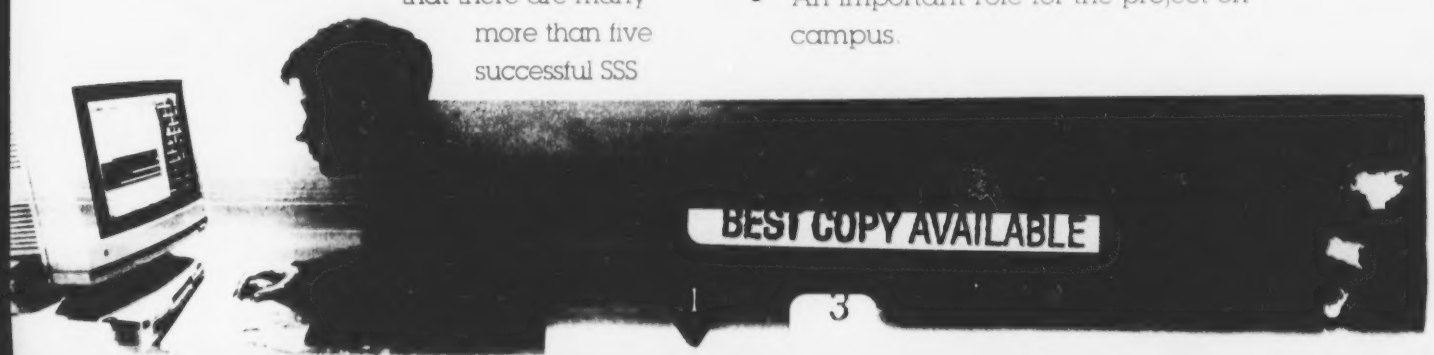
I. What Is the "Best Practices" Study?

This brochure summarizes the results of a study of "best practices" in Student Support Services (SSS), one of the TRIO programs. The purpose of SSS is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of participants, who are first-generation in their families to attend college, disadvantaged, or disabled students. The term "best practices" describes the operation and characteristics of SSS projects that show evidence of success in improving student grade point averages, college retention, or both. To find these projects, those with statistically significant positive outcomes from among the projects included in the National Study of Student Support Services were identified. (The National Study followed SSS freshman participants and comparable nonparticipants at 50 institutions—30 with SSS projects and 20 without—for a period of 3 years, 1991-94.) In 1996, we visited five of the projects with positive outcomes to see how they deliver services. The five projects were in institutions ranging from a small, rural community college to one of the largest state universities in the nation. They included an historically black college as well as a small-town branch campus of a large public institution. It is important to remember that there are many more than five successful SSS projects. Those that are profiled here were selected from the 30 projects that were included in the National Study from among the more than 700 SSS projects currently offering services to students. Also, the National Study was not originally designed to identify project-level effects, so there were methodological limitations in site identification even among the 30 sites. Nevertheless, these five SSS projects revealed features that are important elements of successful projects.

II. What Do Successful Projects Have in Common?

Some of the most important commonalities among the five projects include:

- A project-designed freshman year experience for most or all participants.
- An emphasis on providing academic support for developmental and popular freshman courses.
- Extensive student service contacts.
- Targeted participant recruitment and participation incentives.
- Dedicated staff and directors with strong institutional attachments, and
- An important role for the project on campus.



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A Project-Designed Freshman Year Experience

All five projects offer a home base for participants on campus, but at least three of them go much further **and shape the initial educational experience of the students they serve**. The outcome is accomplished through several different policies and types of service.

- **The SSS project is linked to admission**. In two projects, SSS staff help to determine which students will gain admission to the institution from among students who do not meet regular entrance requirements. By participating in the admissions process, SSS staff identify motivated students who are likely to put in the effort needed to succeed. A third project does not select the students, but those who are specially admitted are required to participate in SSS. SSS participation becomes an integral part of the college experience for the students.
- **The SSS project helps to shape the initial academic program.** Through intrusive advising, SSS staff help students to select their first-year courses. Students are strongly encouraged to enroll in courses where they are likely to perform well and for which academic assistance is available. It is possible to influence initial course choices because one project offers a 6-week residential summer-bridge program prior to the freshman year, while two others meet with students well before the start of freshman year or at the point of registration. Specially admitted students are often required to take particular courses or can select from a short list of options.
- **The SSS project monitors student progress closely and has authority on important academic matters.** Project staff conduct intrusive advising, including course selection, midterm progress reports from faculty, and career planning. Depending on the project, SSS staff decide whether (and when) participants may drop courses, whether participants are placed on academic probation, or whether participants can be suspended or reinstated. Staff also encourage students to plan for a transition out of SSS as soon as practicable.

A Focus on Academic Support for Developmental and Popular Freshman Courses

All five projects emphasize services to build academic skills. Project-provided academic services are designed to support and reinforce regular college courses. Unlike some other SSS projects, none of the five focuses exclusively, or even primarily, on counseling. Rather, these projects offer instruction and supplemental academic assistance. The main academic services include:

- **Supplemental instruction (SI).** Two sites offer regularly scheduled instructional sessions linked to popular introductory courses. Students enroll in these sessions at the same time they enroll in courses. The sessions are devoted to reinforcing the content of the courses as well as enhancing basic academic and study skills.

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- **Course instruction.** In three of the sites, SSS sponsors courses in basic skills—reading and math—either in the summer before or during freshman year. Two sites offer courses in applied skills, such as computer literacy and learning techniques. SSS courses usually offer credit toward full-time status but not toward graduation.
- **Laboratories.** One site offers computer-assisted labs that are required for developmental courses. The labs are staffed by subject-matter specialists who work with students singly and in small groups to practice the skills learned in class.
- **Study groups.** Less formal than SI or labs, regularly scheduled group study is linked to specific courses. Offered at one site, the groups are staffed by professionals or by upper division students who have taken the course. Much like SI, sessions reinforce course content, review homework, and help students prepare for exams.
- **Tutoring.** Four projects offer some one-on-one peer (and occasionally professional) tutoring, but only two projects offer more than a very modest amount. Tutoring ranges from structured sessions (e.g., to review a draft essay) to informal assistance (e.g., on a homework assignment). One-on-one peer tutoring is less common in most of these projects than in SSS projects as a whole.

Maximizing Student Contact

This group of projects makes more efficient use of staff time than most SSS projects. Their median number of contacts with freshman participants is considerably higher than average. These projects do not spend more money than other SSS projects; rather, they offer services in a manner that allows greater contact between students and staff and they take steps to reduce staff activities that interfere with direct services. Some of the key elements in maximizing student contact include the following:

- **Group services predominate.** All of the projects deliver some services to groups, and some provide group services almost entirely. SI, course instruction, and labs are the most common group services, but projects also provide study groups (or group tutoring), workshops, extracurricular activities, and group academic advising.
- **Staff time is used to advantage.** Contact hours are increased by employing, as part-time SSS instructional or advising staff, persons who are full time at the college or in TRIO. As a result, the staff member is available for students for considerably more time than is

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paid for by SSS. Two of the projects use the same staff to deliver both academic services and student advising, thereby also increasing staff opportunities to interact with participants.

- **Activities limiting student contacts are kept to a minimum.** Staff do not spend large amounts of time with institutional committees or other such responsibilities. Rather, project directors fulfill those institutional obligations.

These projects make efforts to keep track of contact hours, but only one has the capacity to monitor contact rates on an ongoing basis (using a computerized system).

Student Targeting and Motivation to Participate in SSS

Part of the reason that these projects deliver more service per participant is that students are more engaged with the projects and more likely to show up for services. As we have already noted, several of these projects provide the initial point of contact between the student and the institution. Further, they provide instructional services, both through courses and with academic support (SI, labs, study groups, or tutoring) linked to developmental or freshman courses. The types of services are part of the reason that students are more motivated to participate in SSS.

In addition:

- Projects that participate in admissions also exercise control over continued college enrollment. They demonstrate a willingness to use their authority to retain, place on probation, suspend, or reinstate students, thereby motivating students to participate in services.
- Projects offer rewards for attending services; for example, one of the projects can ensure that a student who regularly attends tutoring will not fail the course for which he or she is being tutored.
- Projects offer (limited) rewards for participation and achievement, such as recognition, project employment, and limited additional financial aid.
- Projects seek to remove barriers to attending services, for example, by scheduling services at convenient times or providing limited day care (or referrals).
- Projects intervene with faculty and institutional officials during registration or when students face crises that can negatively affect academic performance.

For these projects, the question of motivation is not so much "how can we keep students coming back?" but rather, "how can SSS become a central element in the student's educational life?" For some of these projects, participation levels are not an issue because SSS is at the center of the student's educational experience.

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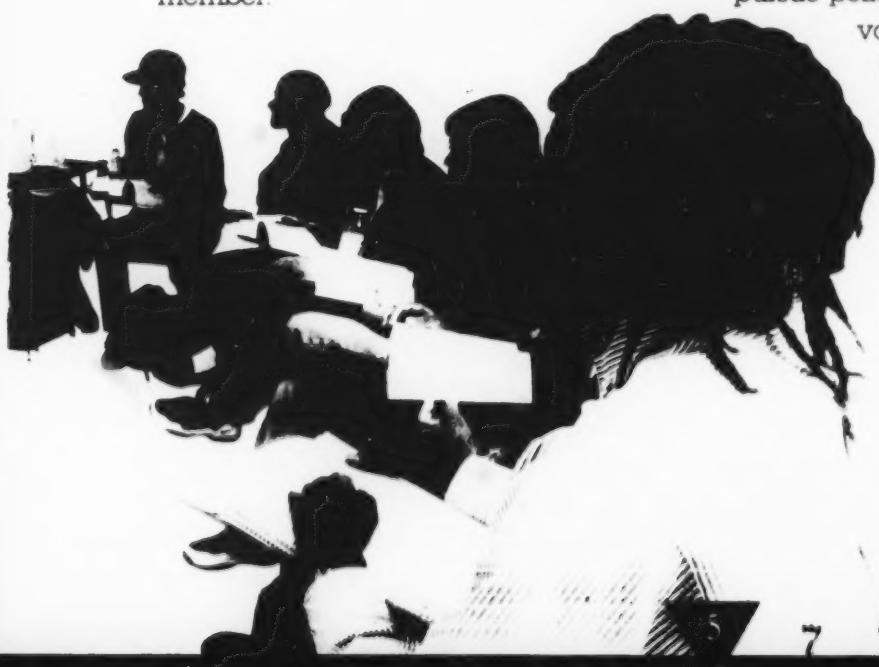
Staff Diversity, Project Directors with Strong Institutional Ties

Staff are diverse. The staff of the five projects vary widely with respect to age, qualifications, and project tenure. With the exception of project directors, almost all the staff are women, but they differ in most other ways. Some projects have staff composed largely of women who have recently graduated from college, while others are staffed by older women. Some projects have staff with extensive project tenure, while other projects have had almost complete staff turnover in the past 4 or 5 years. Backgrounds vary widely. Some projects have hired persons with backgrounds in counseling and guidance or social work primarily, while others have sought subject matter specialists such as former high school teachers or graduate students with advanced degrees in content areas. Staff members represent several racial/ethnic groups. The variation in backgrounds suggests that there is no one optimal background for an SSS staff member.

Project directors have long tenure at the institution. All of these successful projects are headed by directors who have been with TRIO or similar programs at the same institution for many years. All but one of the five directors have been at their institutions for at least 13 years. The directors are well known and respected on their campuses, even at the largest institution in the study. These directors often play an important institutional role in determining the policies affecting disadvantaged students and can advocate for changes in policy when needed.

SSS as Campus Safety Valve

Although these are successful projects, the institutions in which they are located are not extraordinary with respect to serving disadvantaged students. The institutions do not provide the SSS projects with sizable resources. These projects receive institutional support that is about average for SSS projects as a whole. Nor do those institutions always pursue policies advantageous to disadvantaged students. Most have tightened entrance requirements over the past several years and now deny entrance to some students that SSS would have served in the past. Yet the institutional officials interviewed for this study express admiration for their SSS projects and staff. They point with pride to the success of the projects in helping at-risk students succeed in college.



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It is likely that the SSS projects at these institutions have gained prominence because they embody the institution's altruistic instincts. An SSS program may not receive sizable institutional resources, but it is the institution's vehicle for inclusion. In other words, the SSS project provides a "safety valve" for the campus, allowing the institution to continue to accept some at-risk students while retaining confidence that these students will succeed (and not depress institutional completion rates). The projects are seen as offering instruction and services that enhance the performance of poorly prepared students rather than increasing the risks and costs to the institution associated with accepting them. In turn, the projects' status allows them to advocate for more favorable policies for disadvantaged students. Unlike some SSS projects, these projects are visible, not marginal, to the institutions in which they reside.

III. The Dynamics of Service Delivery

The best practices study also describes the instructional and service delivery approaches that stand out among the case study sites. As already noted, these projects provide more group learning (and less one-on-one tutoring) than other SSS projects. They are also noteworthy for the intrusive advising process and integrated service approach most have adopted for freshman participants. The following is a summary of some of the characteristics of service delivery in these programs.

Group Learning

Group learning (through courses, SI, and group tutoring or study groups) is an effective way to learn. SSS-sponsored group learning offers a low key and supportive setting within an institutional environment where students are often nervous and fearful. SSS instructors and group leaders understand that many students have had limited experience, that their previous formal education was not always a positive experience, and that they often need to learn skills their professors may assume they already possess (such as reading critically or doing simple math without errors). Instructors and tutors try to put students at ease, teach them the basics, keep them abreast of class work, and prepare them to take exams and write papers.

Course instruction. Most SSS-sponsored course instruction in these sites is developmental. Its aim is to enhance the basic skills needed to complete college-level work. SSS-sponsored courses are offered in diverse subject areas—reading and writing, algebra, and study skills—but the dynamics of the courses are similar. In most cases the instructors use a lecture format supplemented with small-group discussion. The classes are small, the instructors are very patient, and the prevailing message is that a student will succeed if he or she does the work conscientiously. Class sessions also provide an opportunity for staff to give noninstructional assistance, such as information about registration deadlines and graduation requirements.

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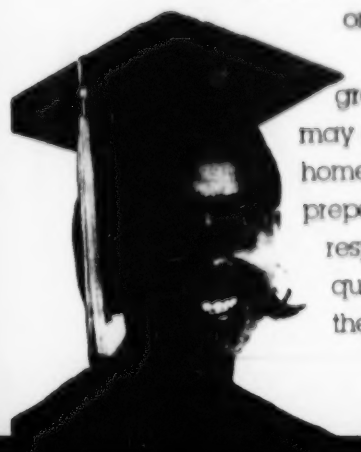
Supplemental instruction (SI). SI is additional instructional hours attached to popular courses for freshmen. The SI we observed at two sites was led by graduate students or other college graduates with specialized subject knowledge. SI instructors attend the regular lectures with the students and then hold classes of their own with smaller groups of students. SI may or may not carry additional course credits. The teaching methods are fairly traditional—the leader lectures and asks the students questions. The classes provide an opportunity for students to review their notes from lectures, ask questions, hear expanded explanation of concepts, review homework, get a head start on materials for future classes, and prepare for exams and term papers. SI teaches students how to read for important information, stay abreast in class preparation, take notes, tackle multiple-choice tests, and master other important study skills.

Study groups (group tutoring). Study groups are informal groups of students who meet on a regular basis with a leader (sometimes called a group tutor). Only one site we visited has formal study groups. Leaders are upper division students or professionals. Groups meet once or twice a week and more often before exams. Some sessions are more like extensions of one-on-one tutoring while others have a strong group dynamic. Students may get individual help with homework assignments or may prepare for an exam by jointly responding to sample questions provided by the leader.



Active Counseling

Freshman year active or intrusive advising has several important components:

- **Multiple meetings with students during a semester.** Typically there are three sessions, including a meeting at the start of the semester, a midterm review to discuss the students' performance in their classes, and a final session to plan course selections for the next semester.
- **Midterm faculty evaluations.** SSS advisors receive systematic information on student performance from all instructors. The information is given to the students at individual meetings where there is also a focus on actions to improve low performance.
- **Support and advocacy for students.** As needed, advisors may intervene with faculty if students are having academic or personal problems. Some project staffs even have small loan funds to help students with short-term problems like the need for bus fare or car repairs.
- **Referrals.** Staff refer students to other service providers for tutoring, personal counseling, testing for disabilities, day care, etc.
- **Academic decisions.** SSS advisors have authority over course selection, dropping courses, probation, suspension, and reinstatement, especially when projects serve specially or conditionally admitted students.

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Most of the projects we studied try to shift students out of SSS and into faculty advising by the end of sophomore year. As a result, there is considerable emphasis on developing detailed plans to meet requirements and declare majors.

Integrated Services

While many projects say that they deliver integrated or "holistic" services, we tried to define what these terms mean in the best practices projects we visited. Among the five projects, we identified three different kinds of service integration:

- Providing a mix of academic and support services to participants based on a staff assessment of each student's individual need.
- Integrating project staff, so that the same people are acting as academic advisors and instructors (i.e., SI leaders, course instructors, lab supervisors, group study leaders). This lack of staff differentiation enables more student-staff contact and enhances staff credibility with students.
- Integrating of SSS staff and participants with a project, as well as with the participants and staff of other TRIO projects. This approach helps to build community within SSS. It also provides SSS participants with opportunities to work (e.g., as Upward Bound tutors) and to find out about college research opportunities (through the McNair program).

More detail about these projects and the study is contained in the full report, which can be obtained by calling 1-800-USA-LEARN (872-5327).

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